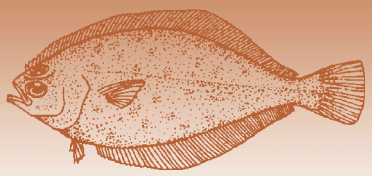
# Groundfish Management



## Introduction

Groundfish have always been important to the cultures of the treaty Indian tribes in western Washington. Today, harvest restrictions in place to protect weak wild salmon stocks – coupled with poor market conditions – have made groundfish species such as halibut, sablefish, Pacific cod and rockfish increasingly important to the treaty Indian tribes.

Unfortunately, just as coastal treaty tribes are beginning to fully access some of their treaty-reserved harvest of groundfish, several rockfish species have declined sharply. As a result, severe harvest restrictions have been implemented, threatening the cultural, spiritual and economic vitality of coastal treaty tribes.

### Background

Treaty reserved fishing rights upheld by the courts in *U.S. vs. Washington*, established the tribes as co-managers of the groundfish resource. The tribes work closely with the State of Washington and U.S. government to develop and implement species conservation plans for all groundfish stocks in Puget Sound and along the Pacific coast.

Halibut are managed through the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC), a bilateral management entity established in 1923 by the governments of the United States and Canada. The mandate of the organization is to study and preserve the stocks of Pacific halibut within the territorial waters of both nations.

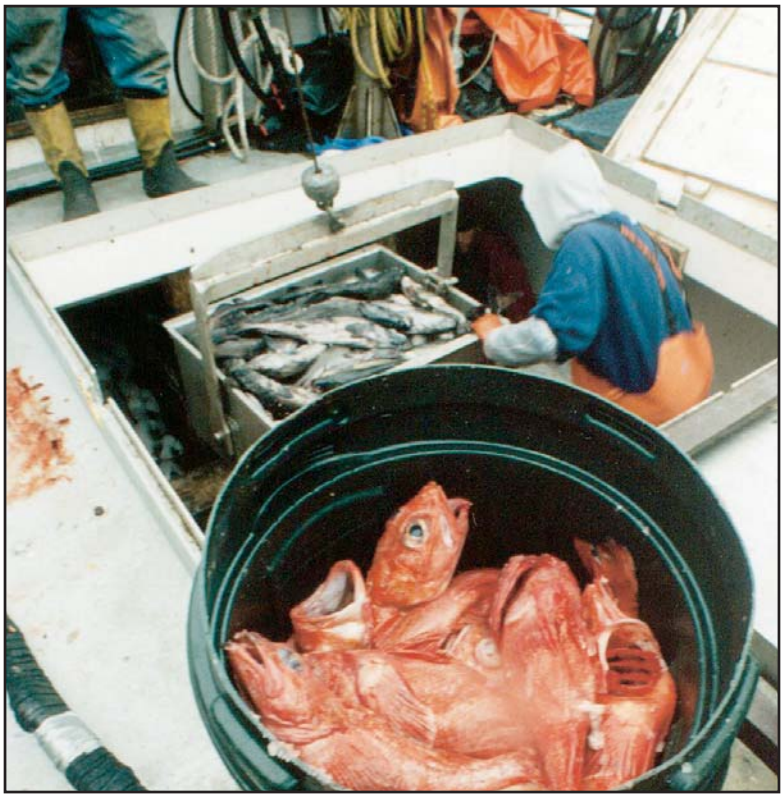
IPHC scientists assess the halibut stocks and the IPHC governing body develops a total allowable catch for stocks in various fishing areas along the Pacific coast from Alaska to northern California.

Fisheries for groundfish species such as sablefish, whiting and rockfish – in waters 3-200 miles off the West Coast – are managed through the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The council includes representatives of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the non-Indian commercial fishing industry, representatives of the non-Indian recreational fishing industry, the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho and California, as well as a tribal representative.

NMFS scientists assess stocks annually. Various advisory committees analyze the assessments and develop catch recommendations that are passed on to the council, which develops quotas for Indian and non-Indian fisheries.

### Status Of Groundfish Stocks In Western Washington

While some groundfish species are generally healthy, such as halibut, coastal Pacific cod and several species of flatfish, others are severely depressed,



A catch of rockfish is unloaded from a treaty tribal fishing boat on the Washington coast.

including a number of coastal rockfish species. In 2000, the National Marine Fisheries Service completed a status review of six Puget Sound groundfish stocks in response to a petition to list the stocks as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. The species included Pacific hake, Pacific cod, walleye pollock and three species of rockfish. None were found to be in need of protection under the ESA.

The agency examined a number of factors likely responsible for the species' decline, including harvest, habitat degradation, climate changes, and marine mammal predation. Although until the early 1980s there was a commercial Puget Sound hake fishery, the remaining species are typically targeted by sport fishermen.

A number of rockfish stocks along the Pacific Coast have been in sharp decline in recent years. In particular, depressed populations of yelloweye, bocaccio and canary rockfish have led to severe coastwide management restrictions for both commercial and recreational fisheries.

## Tribal Groundfish Management

Tribal communities, with limited opportunities for economic diversification, already have been devastated over the past two decades by declining salmon populations and poor market conditions. The groundfish cutbacks come at a time when the coastal tribes are just beginning to fully access some of their treaty-reserved harvest of groundfish stocks. Tribal fishermen have invested heavily in the proper gear to fully participate in these fisheries, only to find their seasons curtailed.

Washington coastal treaty Indian tribes – Makah, Quileute, Hoh and the Quinault Indian Nation – are experiencing conservative quotas and conducting restrictive fisheries to ensure protection of weak groundfish stocks while allowing harvest of healthy groundfish populations.

The tribes are continuing to implement strict "trip limits" on their fishermen that limit the number of fish from depressed groundfish stocks that can be harvested incidentally during fisheries on healthy fish populations. For example, tribal fishermen targeting halibut, sablefish or whiting, are allowed only a small incidental harvest of a weak groundfish stock before being required to stop fishing in a particular area.

Tribes will continue to consider additional time and location restrictions to further minimize impacts on weak groundfish stocks. All of the potential impacts from the proposed tribal groundfish fisheries fall well within the guidelines being set by the PFMC.

As a manager of the groundfish resource with the federal and state governments, the tribes want to work together to address a significant lack of data on groundfish populations. When possible, biologists from coastal tribes and the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission participate in the federal surveys that take place once every three years.

A goal of the co-managers is to have the survey occur every other year. One of the surveys is new and examines different areas than the old design. It is one step in the direction of obtaining better data for the different regions. The tribes would also like to see better surveys conducted in typical groundfish habitat, which is rocky. Many of the current surveys for groundfish occur in areas with smooth bottoms, which is not preferred groundfish habitat.

The existing data gaps result in the need for restrictive fisheries coastwide, regardless of regional differences in the health and abundance of some rockfish stocks.

Better data enables the tribes to make better management decisions. It also enables the tribes to tailor their management approach to take into consideration the differences that exist between groundfish populations from different areas along the coast.

## Federal Government Groundfish Management

The PFMC manages the various groundfish species as a single, coastwide management unit with harvest levels set either as a single quota or as two regional quotas. This has led to disproportionate landing trends along the Pacific coast. Under this management approach, harvest is not directly related to the abundance of targeted species in a particular area. Consequently, harvest off the California coast can lead to increased harvest restrictions off Washington.

The design of resource assessment efforts also has hampered timely management response to severe population declines. The majority of stock assessment estimates are based on annual shelf/slope surveys, but species-specific rockfish management results in a vast number of stocks that need regular assessment updates. Constraints associated with a coastwide management unit approach, coupled with the large number of species involved, has resulted in only a portion of the stocks being assessed in a timely manner. The problem is exacerbated by the limited number of scientists available for stock assessments.

The assessments, combined with differences in life history characteristics of some species, has led to critical data gaps for some species. Some rockfish species such as yelloweye and canary, for example, cannot be fully assessed because their preferred habitat is rocky sea bottom, which is inaccessible to NMFS trawl survey gear.

Tribal, state, and federal fishery managers currently are discussing ways to restructure West Coast groundfish fisheries to address concerns over the status of yelloweye and canary rockfish. However, recent catch data from Washington fisheries indicate that the yelloweye rockfish decline off the outer coast is not as severe as the declines being observed in Oregon and California waters. The ability to shape a regional management response in concert with regional abundance is hampered by lack of data caused by the existing structuring of stock assessment surveys. As a result, the management responses under consideration for the tribes' usual and accustomed fishing areas off the Washington coast are actually being driven by stock status assessments from Oregon and California.

A transition to a more regional or ecosystem-based management approach is needed for groundfish. Management actions must be tailored to resource levels and related fisheries in particular areas. Regional management capability is required for effective resource management and more equitable distribution of impacts between fisheries. Tribal harvest of yelloweye rockfish has been minor, for example, but this fish is taken consistently in fisheries directed at other healthy groundfish species, such as halibut. As a result, the application of coastwide proportional reductions on yelloweye rockfish has a disproportional effect on tribal fisheries.

## Tribal Program Needs

Currently, the four coastal Washington treaty tribes do not receive funds specifically for groundfish management activities. At the same time, the coastwide decline in groundfish stocks and resulting increased regulatory constraints are exponentially increasing the management burden on tribal fishery programs.

Although the tribes have begun to formulate some of the necessary management tools and assessment of groundfish resources, inadequate staffing and funding limits have prevented development of fully functional tribal groundfish programs. Full development of tribal groundfish programs will require additional funding to augment existing fishery management activities.

Tribal needs are divided into resource assessment and base program augmentation needs. Resource assessment needs address the management crisis resulting from the coastwide decline of groundfish, and yelloweye rockfish in particular. The objective is to develop coordinated regional management capability for groundfish resources located within the tribes' combined usual and accustomed fishing areas. Base program augmentation needs address requirements

for development of effective groundfish management programs.

Tribal resource assessment needs include:

- **Assessment** – The initial proposal is to assess stock structure and to conduct an abundance survey of the rocky, non-trawlable rockfish habitat between Leadbetter Point and Cape Flattery off the outer Washington coast. The objective is to develop an accurate assessment of rockfish populations off the Washington Coast from which future management decisions can be based.

- **Port Sampling** – A greater intensity of port sampling is required with the shift toward regional-specific and species-specific rockfish management. Tribal rockfish landings will require species differentiation and age composition sampling. This increased catch information is essential to adequately address the current decline in rockfish populations.

Tribal and Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission biologists participate in a groundfish population survey off the Washington coast.

- **Fishery Observers** - The transition to greater regional- and species-specific management increases the demand for fisheries specific information. Accurate fishery data regarding species catch rates by time, area, and gear type will be required. Such catch per unit effort information is essential for determining regional estimates for abundance, as well as harvest and bycatch rates.

Tribal base program augmentation needs include:

- **Management Program** – The establishment of a fully functional groundfish management program is necessary to ensure that the coastal tribes can effectively participate as resource managers in the federal PFMC groundfish management process. Additional qualified staff will assist the tribes to more fully participate in pre-season, in-season, and post-season groundfish management activities.

- **Enforcement** – The establishment of an adequate tribal enforcement program would complement the increased groundfish emphasis. Movement toward species-specific rockfish management increases the need for a greater level of intensity in enforcement activity. A greater enforcement presence will be required to monitor compliance with increased trip limits and landing restrictions.

- **Research** – Dedicated program funds are required to continue investigations of possible management responses to address changing resource conditions. Current pilot studies are exploring possible bycatch reduction methods. Base funding is required to fully assess and complete studies regarding the effects of depth, time, area, and bait type on reducing bycatch rates on species of concern. In addition, there is need for a detailed mapping of groundfish habitat within the tribal usual and accustomed fishing areas.